

Can I Get a Witness? To the Ends of the Earth

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Good morning, church! For those of you who are visiting with us, my name is Mark Potter and I'm privileged to serve as the campus pastor here. Today is the final day of our sermon series on Acts 1:8. Please, hold your applause.

Two weeks ago, we discussed the Biblical definition of a witness along with how to share Christ and demonstrate His sacrificial love to those in our surrounding community. That is, to be a witness to those in our Jerusalem.

Last week, we talked about how the early church scattered from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria. And we discussed some practical ways that we, as a church, can tend to those who are hurting right here in Johnson County like the Good Samaritan did for the half-dead man in the road.

This morning, we are going to take the journey from Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth and discover how we, at Colonial, can "be a light for the nations," both globally and locally, "that (God's) salvation may reach to the ends of the earth," (Isaiah 49:6b).

But first, if you are able, please stand as we read Acts 1:8 together:

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8 ESV)

Thank you, please be seated. Will you pray with me?

My sermon, again, is titled, "Can I Get a Witness to the Ends of the Earth," and I have three subheadings:

- I. Witnessing to the Gentiles
- II. Reaching the Unreached
- III. Serving the Nations Among Us

- I. Witnessing to the Gentiles

Despite Jesus exhorting His disciples to make disciples of all nations and to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth, they did not consider Christianity to be its own religion at first. While in Jerusalem, it hadn't really occurred to them that the gospel should also be shared among non-Jews. They believed that Jesus's life and teachings were simply an extension of Judaism, which made sense considering He was a Jewish messiah with Jewish disciples who fulfilled Jewish prophecy and preached salvation first and foremost to the Jewish people.

In reality, it took persecution from the Jews combined with personal revelation from the Holy Spirit to solidify in their brains that Jesus had not just come for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles.

So how did the gospel travel from Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth?

After the martyrdom of Stephen and the ensuing persecution of the early church in Acts 7-8, the Jerusalem church scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria. I shared about this last week. But the man who was primarily responsible for the persecution of Christ followers dramatically and suddenly converted to Christ himself in Acts 9. His name, of course, was Saul of Tarsus – also known as the great Apostle Paul. It was Paul, then, who would become the primary champion of the gospel being shared among the Gentiles throughout the remainder of the book of Acts.

Philip and Peter also had significant roles, however. Back in Acts 8, as Philip traveled south from Jerusalem to Gaza, he encountered an Ethiopian eunuch who was a diplomat of the Ethiopian queen. And although the eunuch was reading from the prophet Isaiah, he had no idea what it meant. So, Philip explained it to him and told him about Jesus. As a result, the eunuch placed his faith in Jesus and was baptized, effectively becoming the first example in Scripture of a Gentile converting to Christ.

Then in Acts 10, Peter had a vision from God that would forever change his view of sharing the gospel among Gentiles. You recall the story: Peter sees a bunch of common, unclean reptiles, birds, and other animals descending on a giant sheet with four corners that represented the four corners of the earth. Then a voice said, “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” But Peter refused because the animals were unclean. And the voice said, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” And this happened to him three times.

Simultaneously to all this, a God-fearing Gentile centurion named Cornelius had an encounter with an angel who told him to send for Peter. And so he did, and Peter went to meet the centurion, and they shared stories of what had happened to them. Peter told him, “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” (Acts 10:34-35)

Then Peter bore witness to the fact that everyone who believes in Jesus will receive forgiveness of sins, and Cornelius and his household believed, received the Holy Spirit, and were baptized.

According to the Scripture:

While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. (Acts 10:44-46).

Upon arriving back in Jerusalem, Peter was immediately criticized by the religious legalists: “You did what!? You ate unkosher food with Gentiles?”

Now to us, this might seem silly. But to them, it was a massive deal. Why? Because of their food laws that the Lord gave to Moses back in Leviticus. They were simply trying to be good, law-abiding messianic Jews.

For example, in Leviticus 11, it says:

And the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying to them, “Speak to the people of Israel, saying, These are the living things that you may eat among all the animals that are on the earth. Whatever parts the hoof and is cloven-footed and chews the cud, among the animals, you may eat. Nevertheless, among those that chew the cud or part the hoof, you shall not eat these: The camel, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. And the rock badger, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. And the hare, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. And the pig, because it parts the hoof and is cloven-footed but does not chew the cud, is unclean to you. You shall not eat any of their flesh, and you shall not touch their carcasses; they are unclean to you. (Lev 11:1-8)

The thing is, the Jews had been following these kosher food regulations for hundreds and hundreds of years. And here was Peter, who had this one-off vision from the Lord, and now suddenly everything was acceptable to eat. And so, he went to the Gentile centurion’s house and ate whatever he wanted and was criticized for it.

Now, I don’t want you to miss the point here. People were coming to faith in Jesus, but Peter’s home church was criticizing him for not following the religious rules. In fact, this was a huge sticking point for decades to come. How could a Gentile profess faith in Christ and not need to be circumcised? And how could a Jew come to faith and eat anything they want? These were the major questions that needed to be addressed.

According to New Testament scholar Tim Mackie:

“The inclusion of Gentiles into the Jesus Movement and on what terms is, hands down, the most controversial issue rocking the majority of the New Testament.”

-Tim Mackie, *The Bible Project*

Pastor Tami and I attended a Nazarene seminary together. Cory Ozbun and I like to refer to her as 4-0 because she graduated summa cum laude. So, if you ever have any questions about the Bible, don’t ask me. Ask her. Actually, there were three or four of us Presbyterians there, and our Nazarene friends liked to ask us about our views on predestination, while we liked to question them on their beliefs surrounding their doctrine of holiness and sanctification.

What we learned when reading the Church of the Nazarene manual – which is basically their Book of Order – is that it talks about refraining from dancing, alcohol, and tobacco products. So, Tami and I decided to organize a seminary rave. I’m kidding. That was Cory.

But the early church being critical of Peter for sharing the gospel at dinner with Gentiles would have been somewhat similar to our Nazarene seminary friends criticizing us for having a beer at a bar with non-believers while they came to faith in Christ. It would've broken their religious code.

Now I'm not just picking on the Church of the Nazarene... well, maybe I am a little. Truthfully, I could say similar things about any denomination, as well as Western Christianity in general. At times, our faith can become so woven into the fabric of our cultural customs and religious rules that we fail to see or celebrate the amazing things that God has done.

Church, may our own religious rules and cultural customs never prohibit us from sharing Christ with nonbelievers.

Circling back to the reality of the gospel continuing to spread among the Gentiles, we see in Acts 11 that the first Gentile Christian church was planted in the city of Antioch, which was the capital of the region of Syria.

Located three hundred miles north of Jerusalem, Antioch was a large port city, the third largest city in the Roman Empire boasting a population of half a million people. It was a luxurious city; its main street was more than four miles long and was paved with marble and lined with marble colonnades. It was a powerful city in terms of commercial and political power... a busy city that attracted all kinds of people – Syrians, Greeks, Jews, and Romans. It was a diverse melting pot of culture, ethnicity, and religion -- the New York City of its day.

Unfortunately, Antioch was also known for its immorality and idolatry. It contained not only the Hellenistic cults of the Greek pantheon, but the Syrian worship of Baal and the Mother Goddess, as well as mystery religions. Among other idols, there were statues of deified Roman emperors and Greco-Roman deities including a local shrine dedicated to Daphne, a Greek nymph thought to rule over the streams, fountains, rivers, and wells.

As the new believers scattered to this largely pagan city, they began sharing the message of Christ with the Gentiles there, and "a great number who believed turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:21). When the news hit Jerusalem, they sent Barnabas to Antioch to check it out and upon arrival, the Scripture says that he "saw the grace of God" and "was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose" (Acts 11:23).

Barnabas then recruited Paul to come shepherd the growing church in Antioch. They stayed for about a year, and this church became the launching point for Paul's missionary journeys. In addition, it was there in Antioch where the disciples were first called "Christians," which means "the king's people." (Acts 11:26)

And so, through the formation of this Gentile church, these new Gentile converts began their missionary journey to reach all nations. The apostles' gospel *message* stayed the same, but their

methods changed. They adapted some of their language to relate to the Greco-Roman culture. Paul was the master at this. He used common language and sought common ground. He said things like, "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some." (1 Cor 9:22).

Due to its consistent message and adaptable methods, the gospel had global appeal. It appealed to the socially elite and socially depressed, slaves and free, young and old, men and women. Speaking of women, a number of women were predominant figures in sharing the gospel early on, including the likes of Priscilla, Lydia, Phoebe, Euodia, and Syntyche. How would you like to name your daughter Euodia or Syntyche? Hopefully, I didn't offend anyone in the audience.

The point is that the gospel doesn't discriminate. It shows no partiality of age, ethnicity, gender, education level, or social status. This is highlighted by Paul in Galatians 3:28 when he said, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

According to Tim Mackie, "Acts is giving us the genetic code of a movement that will become the most culturally, ethnically diverse movement in human history." -Tim Mackie, *The Bible Project*

The gospel was advancing, and it would quickly become a global reality. But until Jesus returns, there are still many, many more people to reach. This leads me to my second subheading:

II. Reaching the Unreached

The birth of the Christian movement was, from its early years, a multiethnic ancient Eastern religious movement. More recently, however, Christianity had become so embedded in Western culture that it's easy for us to forget how it started. But even now, two thousand years later, there are a massive amount of people from all across the world who have not yet been exposed to the gospel.

The Joshua Project is a global research initiative that tracks the progress of the gospel spreading to the ends of the earth. And from its data, we see that there are currently 3.4 billion people who have been deemed totally "unreached." That's 42.4 percent of the world's population. This doesn't include those who are "minimally reached, partially reached, or superficially reached." Those are separate categories. 3.4 billion!

Now, the good news is that globally, an estimated 50,000 people are coming to Christ every single day. And an estimated 3,500 house churches are planted every single week. (joshuaproject.net)

In 1949, there were less than a million Christians in China. Now, there are an estimated 100 million.

In Iran, there were only 500 known Christ followers in 1979. Currently, the number sits at 1 million.

In Indonesia -- the largest Muslim country in the world -- there have been 80,000 new house churches planted over the past few years. Over 15 percent of the population are now Christians.

India is now seeing dramatic church growth like China did in the 70s and 80s.

In Mongolia, there were less than 10 known Christ followers in 1989. Now, there are approx. 80,000 with an 8% annual growth rate (AGR).

For every 1 new Christ follower in the U.S. or Europe, there are 16 new Christ followers in Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

You see, there has been a great shift happening in our lifetime. When most of us were born, there were more Christians in North America and Europe than the rest of the world combined. Today, two thirds of all Christians live outside of North America and Europe. By 2050, North America and Europe will make up just 15 percent of Christians worldwide, mostly coming from countries like Nigeria, Brazil, India, and China.

The good news is that God is on the move! But there is still much, much more work to be done. The harvest truly is plentiful.

Did you know that there are more people who don't know Christ today than at any other time in human history (5.27 billion as of 2020). The truth is that Buddhism (1.0%), Hinduism (2.0%), and Islam (1.9%) are all growing at a faster rate than Christianity (.8%).

With regard to unreached people groups, these are determined by the groups that have few, if any, indigenous missionaries, Bibles, Christian resources, or churches, combined with the threat of persecution. Worldwide, there are 17,445 total people groups and of these, 7,391 (42.4 percent) remain unreached. (joshuaproject.net)

This morning, I've printed off cards of the 100 largest unreached people groups in the world which account for nearly 2.5 billion souls. These cards should be on or beneath your chair as you entered the service today. Everyone should have a different one to pray over. Take these cards home, put them on your mirror or on your fridge, and join me in praying for an unreached people group.

The bottom line: The Great Commission is not finished! And the status quo will not suffice.

This leads me to my final subheading:

III. Reaching the Nations Among Us

During the past couple weeks, I revealed our OP Campus vision with you along with some strategies involving how to reach our Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. Here is a recap of what I shared:

Our OP Campus Vision is...

To live into Jesus' prayer for Kingdom Oneness and live out the Greatest Commandment and Great Commission in our Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Our four strategies that I mentioned to help us accomplish this are:

1. Build meaningful friendships with ethnic churches and people of color in our 5-mile radius.
2. Elevate our commitment to local school prayer/partnership.
3. Continue to develop & promote a hope and healing pathway of support groups and resources that we can offer to our congregation, church partners, school partners, and ministry partners.
4. Deepen involvement with Mission Southside.

These four strategies are mostly focused on reaching our Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. But in terms of reaching the ends of the earth, there are two more strategies I want to share with you:

5. Encourage people to attend the Perspectives class.

Perspectives is a 15-lesson education course exploring different aspects of God's global purpose in a multi-faceted learning experience. It teaches cross-cultural missions from four "perspectives": Biblical, historical, cultural, and strategic. You'll learn how to be His witnesses in our community, in our country, and around the globe while finding His purpose in wherever it is that God has called you to go.

There is a cost to it, but the first two classes are free of charge. You are all invited to attend the first class on Aug. 21st over at the South KC Campus. A registration link is on our website.

Finally, our sixth and final campus strategy in terms of reaching the nations is:

6. Deepen our involvement with International Students Inc. (ISI)

Overseas mission trips are great. But you don't need to travel to Haiti, or Kenya, or India to reach the nations. The nations are already among us! We are the nations. We are the Gentile converts. If someone hadn't shared the gospel with us, we would still be separated from Christ and without the hope of salvation. And yet, there are many people from all over the world that have come to the U.S. for school, or for work, who may not know Christ. And it's our job to befriend them, and serve them, and share the gospel with them.

So at this time, I want to invite up my friend and one of our church members Sandeep Thomas, who is on campus staff with International Students Inc.

Ask Sandeep to share a God story and how we can get more involved in ISI.

- Highlight home goods collection on Aug 20th
- Befriending international students

Church, are you feeling excited? Encouraged? Overwhelmed? I'm excited. Listen, we have a great opportunity here at Colonial because we have really been blessed with some tremendous ministry partners, incredible volunteers, and an abundance of resources.

In closing, when we took the student ministry down to Guatemala 14 or 15 years ago, some of our adult volunteers installed a water purification system there. It was amazing to be able to drink purified water from the brand new water fountain. Prior to that, as the well was being dug, they recognized that they had tapped into an artesian water source. The water just kept flowing and flowing. And so, what they thought would barely be enough water for the little school was actually enough for half the village. God had provided an abundance of resource. All they needed to do was tap into it.

Listen, I'm convinced that Colonial is an artesian well for spreading the gospel in Kansas City and beyond. The Holy Spirit will continue to provide the resources if we continue to tap into His Living Water as we seek to be His witnesses in our Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Let's pray.